

This is not enough

"Let's go home, so we won't get lost."

William

The apartment wrapped around me like a familiar blanket the moment we stepped through the door. I hadn't realized how tense I'd been—how much energy it had taken to exist in the lobby, to maintain composure while my nervous system screamed about danger and exposure and all the ways the outside world could hurt me. But now, with the door closed behind us and the familiar walls surrounding me, I felt my shoulders drop. My breathing slowed. The constant low hum of anxiety that had accompanied me downstairs began to quiet.

Home, my body recognized. Safe.

It was strange to feel relief about returning to the place I'd been trying to escape. Strange to acknowledge that progress didn't mean I stopped needing the sanctuary. It just meant I could leave it sometimes. And come back.

Lego kicked off his boots by the door—arranging them neatly beside my own shoes, a habit he'd developed years ago at my mother's house—and padded into the apartment in his socked feet. He moved with the comfortable familiarity of someone who knew the space, who didn't need to ask where things were or wait for permission to make himself at home.

"I'm starving," he announced, heading straight for the kitchen. "What do you have?"

"I ordered groceries this week," I said, following him. "There should be actual food. Not just instant noodles."

His eyebrows rose in exaggerated surprise. "P'Will buying real groceries? Who are you and what have you done with my hermit brother?"

"I'm trying new things."

"I can see that." He opened the refrigerator and peered inside, his expression shifting from skeptical to impressed. "Vegetables. Actual vegetables. And meat. And—is that tofu?"

"The soft kind. For soup."

"You're going to make soup?"

"We're going to make soup. Together."

The words came out before I'd fully planned them, but they felt right. Cooking alone was a chore—something I did when I had to, without pleasure or purpose. But cooking with someone else was different. Cooking with Lego was different. It was

one of the things I remembered most vividly from my childhood—the two of us in my mother's kitchen, chopping vegetables while she supervised, learning recipes by doing, filling the house with smells that meant love and safety.

Lego's face lit up. "Really? You'll let me use your kitchen?"

"It's not that sacred."

"The last time I tried to cook here, you hovered over me like I was about to commit arson."

"That was years ago. And you were trying to flambé something."

"I had the fire extinguisher ready!"

"Lego, You didn't need to be setting things on fire."

He laughed—that bright, infectious sound—and started pulling ingredients from the refrigerator. "Fine, no flambéing today. What are we making?"

I moved to join him, surveying what we had to work with. Vegetables, proteins, rice, the basic building blocks of a hundred possible dishes. My mother's voice echoed in my memory, guiding us through recipes she'd made so many times she didn't need to look at them anymore.

"Tom yum," I decided. "Hot and sour soup. It's comfort food."

"Perfect for a rainy week."

We fell into a rhythm without discussing it. I washed and prepped ingredients while Lego handled the more delicate work—slicing mushrooms thin, measuring spices, bruising the lemongrass with the flat of a knife to release its fragrance. He moved through my kitchen with the ease of long familiarity, finding tools and bowls in cabinets he'd opened a hundred times before.

The domesticity of it felt almost surreal. After so many months of isolation—of eating alone at odd hours, of subsisting on whatever required the least effort—the simple act of cooking with another person felt like rediscovering something I'd lost. This is what normal looks like, I thought. This is what I've been missing. While the soup simmered on the stove, Lego began rummaging through my cabinets with the focused determination of someone on a mission.

"What are you looking for?"

"You have to have it somewhere. Auntie would never have let you move into this apartment without—aha!"

He emerged triumphant, holding a transparent glass teapot I didn't even remember owning. It was a beautiful piece—wide-bellied, with a built-in strainer and a graceful

handle—the kind of thing my mother would have chosen, practical and elegant at once.

"I didn't know I had that."

"Of course you didn't. You use the same three mugs for everything and ignore all the nice things Auntie gave you." He was already filling the pot with water, adding ice cubes from my freezer and loose tea leaves from a canister I'd forgotten existed. "She'd be horrified if she knew how you've been living."

"She'd be horrified about a lot of things."

"True." He added something else to the pot—dried flowers, maybe, or citrus peel—and gave it a gentle swirl. "But she'd also be proud. That you're trying. That you came to the lobby today."

"You think so?"

"I know so." He set the teapot aside to steep, then turned to face me with an expression that was surprisingly serious. "She used to talk about you, you know. When you weren't around. She'd tell me about when you were a kid—how stubborn you were, how you'd get stuck in your head and refuse to come out. And she'd say, 'He'll find his way eventually. William always finds his way. He just needs time.'"

My throat tightened. "She said that?"

"All the time. Especially toward the end, She'd say, 'Don't give up on him. He's fighting something we can't see. But he'll win. He always does.'"

I had to look away. The grief that lived permanently in my chest was expanding, pressing against my ribs, making it hard to breathe. Three years since she'd died, and some moments still felt as fresh as the first.

"I don't feel like I'm winning."

"Maybe not. But you're still fighting. That counts."

The soup was ready.

We ladled it into bowls—steaming and fragrant, the broth rich with spice and acid and all the flavors of my childhood—and carried them to the coffee table. The iced tea came too, now fully steeped, the liquid a beautiful orange-gold that caught the light from the window.

Lego poured the tea into glasses, and I watched the ice cubes clink against the sides, the tea leaves and dried flowers dancing in the amber liquid. It was mesmerizing in its simplicity—just water and plant matter and frozen water, transformed by time and temperature into something beautiful.

We ate in comfortable silence at first, the soup warm and grounding, the tea cool and refreshing. The contrast was perfect—heat and cold, salt and sweet, flavors that complemented each other in the way good things often did.

When the bowls were empty and the teapot was half-drained, we migrated to the sofa. Lego curled into his usual corner, feet tucked beneath him, glass cradled in both hands. I took the opposite end, close enough to reach him but far enough for comfortable sprawling.

The afternoon light was golden now, streaming through the windows I'd opened that morning. The painting of Est's hands—the rose bright between them—was still positioned near the glass, still drying, still waiting to become an apology I could send.

Lego's eyes followed mine to the canvas. For a moment, neither of us spoke. The ice cubes clinked softly in our glasses. The distant sounds of the city drifted up from below.

Then Lego said: "I saw P'Est."

The words landed in the quiet like stones dropped into still water. I looked at him, waiting for more, my heart already beginning to beat faster. Est. He'd seen Est. Had spoken to Est, maybe. Had existed in the same space as the person I'd been painting and apologizing to and thinking about obsessively for weeks.

"At my modeling job," Lego continued, his voice careful. Measured. "He was the photographer."

I hadn't known that. Hadn't known that Est was working, that he'd moved on to other projects, that his life was continuing without me in it. The information was simultaneously relieving and devastating—relief that he was functioning, that I hadn't destroyed him completely; devastation that he didn't need me, that my absence was survivable.

"I left quickly," Lego added. "When the session was over. I didn't... I wasn't sure if I should talk to him. Given everything."

"Given that I ruined things with him and you didn't want to make it worse."

"Given that I didn't know what you'd want me to do."

The distinction was important. Lego wasn't avoiding Est on my behalf—he was navigating uncertain terrain, trying to be loyal without understanding what loyalty required.

"And then, at the supermarket near the hospital, I ran into him again." Lego's expression shifted—something darker crossing his features, concern and confusion mixed together. "He didn't look well. Something had happened. I could tell."

My chest tightened. "What do you mean, he didn't look well?"

"I don't know. He was just standing there outside the entrance, in the rain, looking like... like someone who'd been hit. Not physically. But hit." Lego took a sip of his tea, gathering his thoughts. "So I took him to my apartment for tea."

He looked at me then, his eyes direct and slightly defensive. "Don't be mad."

The instruction was unnecessary. The emotion I felt wasn't anger—not at Lego, anyway. It was something more complicated. Gratitude that someone had been there when Est needed help. Guilt that I wasn't the one who could be there. Curiosity about what had happened, what could have left Est standing in the rain looking struck. And underneath it all, the familiar ache of missing someone I'd pushed away.

"It doesn't bother me." I said.

The words came out harsher than I'd intended, their edges sharp with emotions I couldn't quite control. I heard myself and winced internally, but it was too late to soften the delivery.

"After all, it's my fault he's having a bad time."

Lego's brow furrowed. "We don't know that."

I looked at him—really looked, searching his face for the truth underneath the comfort he was offering. His eyes were sincere, as always. Open and honest and completely incapable of the kind of deception that required you to believe your own lies.

"Something happened at the supermarket," he said slowly. "Something that upset him. I didn't dare ask what—he was already so shaken, I didn't want to push. But it wasn't... it didn't seem like it was about you."

"You don't know that."

"No. But I don't know it was about you either." He set his glass down on the coffee table, freeing his hands to gesture as he spoke. "He apologized to me the other day, actually. At the flower shop. He came in and said he wanted to clear the air between us."

This was news. "He came to your shop?"

"Yeah. He said he didn't want things to be awkward between us because we have mutual friends. He bought flowers too—resurrection bush. It's this plant that looks dead when it's dry, but you put it in water and it comes back to life."

The metaphor wasn't lost on me. Things that looked dead, coming back to life.

Recovery. Resurrection. The slow, patient work of adding water to something that had dried out.

"He seemed fine when I talked to him," Lego continued. "Happy, even. Like someone who was working on something, making progress." He paused, considering. "Whatever happened at the supermarket—it was different. Something new. Something that had nothing to do with you or me or any of the stuff from before."

I wanted to believe him. Wanted to accept the possibility that Est's pain wasn't my fault, that the world contained problems I hadn't caused, that not everything that went wrong could be traced back to my breakdown and its aftermath. But the guilt didn't work that way. It didn't respond to logic or evidence. It just sat there, heavy and immovable, insisting that I was responsible for everything, always.

"The painting," I said, gesturing toward the canvas drying by the window. "I want it to be an apology."

Lego's gaze followed my gesture. He studied the painting for a long moment—Est's gray-blue hands, the vivid red rose, the contrast between muted absence and bright declaration.

"It's beautiful," he said finally. "And honest. I think he'll understand what you're trying to say."

"You think?"

"I think you communicate better through paint than through words. You always have. And this—" he nodded toward the canvas, "—this says something words can't. At least, not your words."

I absorbed this, turning it over in my mind. He wasn't wrong. Every text I'd drafted and deleted had felt false, hollow, like I was performing apology rather than actually apologizing. But the painting... the painting had felt true. Had felt like me, for better or worse.

Lego hummed thoughtfully. "Have you thought about adding something else, though? Something to go with the painting?"

"Like what?"

"A letter, maybe? Or flowers?"

The suggestion made me uncomfortable in a way I couldn't immediately articulate. Writing a letter felt too close to all the failed texts—too many words, too much opportunity to say the wrong thing. And flowers...

"I don't think Est would like my strange bouquets," I said. "I'd probably pick

something weird and off-putting. But I don't want to send roses either. It doesn't sound real."

"Why not?"

"Because roses are what everyone sends. They're the default. They don't mean anything specific—they just mean 'I wanted to send flowers and didn't think about it.' I want to send something that actually says something."

Lego smiled at that, small and knowing. "See? That's exactly why you should send flowers. Because you'd pick something that meant something. Something unusual."

"I don't know what flowers mean. You know that."

"But you know what they look like. And you know Est—probably better than you think you do. He's come here several times. You two messaged for weeks. You had phone calls, dates, all those hours of talking. I think you know him well enough to pick flowers he'd appreciate."

I opened my mouth to argue, then closed it again. He had a point. Underneath all the anxiety and self-doubt, I did know Est. Knew his curiosity, his intensity, the way he noticed details that others overlooked. Knew what made him laugh, what made him think, what made his eyes light up with genuine interest.

Maybe I could choose flowers the same way I chose colors for a painting. Not by knowing their official meanings, but by understanding who they were for. What would resonate. What would feel right.

"Anyway," Lego continued, sensing my hesitation, "you still have to wait a few days for the painting to dry properly. You have time to think about it. Don't worry."

"You sound like my therapist."

He laughed, the sound bright and unexpected. "I should start charging."

"You'd make a terrible therapist. You're too biased."

"True. I'd just tell you you're great and feed you cookies instead of making you do the hard work."

I smiled at that—a real smile, not the forced expression I sometimes wore to reassure people I was functioning. "The cookies are appreciated."

"The muffins are better."

"I haven't tried them yet."

"Then we should fix that."

He reached for the bag he'd brought, pulling out a container of the blueberry muffins he'd showed me in photos. They looked even better in person—golden-topped, studded with berries, clearly made with care and attention.

"Go on," he urged, holding one out to me. "Tell me if the lemon zest was a good idea."

The muffin was excellent. The lemon zest had been a good idea—it brightened the flavor without overwhelming it, adding complexity to what could have been a simple, one-note pastry. The blueberries were plump and flavorful, bursting against my tongue with each bite.

"This is really good," I said, and meant it. "Where did you learn to bake like this?"

"YouTube, mostly. And trial and error. You should have seen my early attempts—rock-hard cookies, flat cakes, bread that could have been used as a weapon."

"I would have eaten them anyway."

"That's why I didn't bring them to you. You'd have just politely choked them down and I'd never have learned what I was doing wrong."

We ate our muffins in companionable silence, the afternoon light shifting around us as time passed. The ice in our tea had mostly melted, diluting the remaining liquid, but neither of us moved to refresh our glasses. The moment was comfortable, easy, the kind of relaxed togetherness that had been missing from my life for too long.

I was reaching for a second muffin when I noticed something that made me pause.

Lego had always been slight—"pixie-like," my mother used to say, with a build that suited his dancer's training. But looking at him now, in the honest afternoon light, he seemed diminished. His cheekbones were more prominent than I remembered. His wrists looked fragile where they emerged from his sweater sleeves. The collarbone visible above his tank top seemed sharper, more exposed.

"You're still thin," I said. "You worry me."

The words came out before I could soften them—blunt and direct, the kind of observation Lego would probably dismiss or deflect. But I couldn't pretend I hadn't noticed. Couldn't act like his health didn't matter to me.

His expression flickered—surprise, then something like guilt. "Sorry," he said quietly. "I'm working on it."

"Working on it how?"

"I went to the doctor. He gave me vitamins." He picked at the wrapper of his muffin, not meeting my eyes. "Said I need to eat more regularly. Take better care of myself."



"So it wasn't my imagination."

"No." He finally looked up, his face open and vulnerable in the way it only was when he trusted someone completely. "It's been a hard few months. With school and work and... everything else."

Everything else. The rejection from Tui. The emotional labor of taking care of me. The impossible balancing act of maintaining too many commitments with too little support.

I reached out and stroked his hair, a gesture that felt automatic, natural—something my mother used to do when one of us was struggling. The strands were soft beneath my fingers, still slightly damp from whatever styling product he'd used.

"You're young," I said, borrowing words I'd heard a thousand times in my own childhood. "Make friends. Eat sweets. Don't work yourself into the ground before you've had a chance to live."

Lego laughed, but it was a fragile sound. "You sound like an old man."

"Maybe I am an old man. Twenty-three going on sixty."

"Our birthdays aren't that far away." He tried to smile, but it wavered at the edges. "Four years isn't much. You're not allowed to be old until I'm old too."

"Fair enough."

His smile lingered for a moment, then faded. Something darker crossed his features—a shadow that had nothing to do with lighting or angle.

"My mom sent a present." he said quietly.

The words landed like stones in still water, sending ripples through the comfortable atmosphere we'd built.

Lego's parents were a subject we rarely discussed directly. There was too much complicated history, too much accumulated pain. They'd abandoned him emotionally long before they'd abandoned him physically—shipping him off to the city at sixteen so they could start fresh with their new families, sending money instead of love, remembering his existence only on obligatory occasions.

He reached for his phone, navigating to a photo he'd apparently saved.

Two purple bears. Sitting together on what looked like packaging material, their button eyes staring at the camera with manufactured cheer—the kind of thing you'd find in the "gift ideas" section of a catalog.

"They're twins." Lego said, his voice carefully neutral.

I looked at the image. Then at his face. Then back at the image. Two bears.

His mother had sent them.

His mother, who had left him. Who had started a new family without him. Who had a new child—maybe more than one—who represented everything Lego would never have with her. Was this supposed to be meaningful? Some kind of message about connection, about the family she'd built that didn't include him? Or was it just carelessness—grabbing something from a store, checking "Lego's birthday" off a mental list without thinking about what the gift might mean?

Either option made my stomach turn.

Sometimes I hated his parents.

The thought surfaced with a clarity that surprised me—not the vague discomfort I usually felt when Lego mentioned them, but actual, focused hatred. Sharp and specific and utterly justified.

I'd hated them when we were younger, too. Before I'd had the vocabulary to name the emotion or understand its source. I'd hated them when they didn't show up to Lego's dance performances, leaving him to bow to an audience that didn't contain anyone who belonged to him. I'd hated them when they forgot his birthday—once, twice, so many times that forgetting became the expectation and remembering was the surprise. I'd hated them at school events, when Lego would scan the crowd for faces that were never there, his smile dimming just slightly before he caught himself and brightened it again.

I'd thought I was over that. Thought the passage of time had dulled the edge of my anger, transformed it into something more manageable. We were adults now—or at least, we were supposed to be. Surely adult emotions were meant to be more nuanced, more forgiving, more willing to see the complex humanity in people who'd made mistakes.

But no.

Looking at Lego's face as he showed me those stupid purple bears, I realized the hatred was still there. Still sharp. Still ready to cut.

I hated that they'd left him here alone. Hated that they'd traded him for newer, shinier families, as if children were appliances that could be upgraded when better models came along. Hated that even now, after years of distance and silence, they still found ways to hurt him—thoughtless gifts that reminded him of everything he'd lost, obligations fulfilled without care or intention. And underneath the hatred, something worse.

Guilt.

Because I'd done it too, hadn't I?

I'd left him alone. When he had no one but me and my mother, when we were the closest thing to family he had, I'd pulled away. Closed my door. Stopped answering his messages, stopped inviting him over, stopped being the brother he needed me to be.

My mother's death had broken something in me—everyone understood that, excused it, made allowances for grief and mental illness and all the ways trauma could reshape a person. But the reality remained: when Lego needed me most, I'd disappeared. Had turned inward so completely that I couldn't see his pain anymore. Had been so consumed by my own darkness that I'd failed to notice he was drowning too.

His parents had abandoned him from across the country, from their new houses with their new spouses and their new children. I'd abandoned him from twenty floors above where he stood, from a distance that should have been closable, from a relationship that should have been strong enough to survive anything.

The difference was one of degree, not kind.

I'll need to talk about this with my therapist, I thought.

The realization was uncomfortable but necessary. This wasn't something I could process alone—this tangle of hatred and guilt and grief, this understanding of how badly I'd failed someone who'd never stopped showing up for me. Dr. Suriya would help me sort through it. Would ask the questions that helped me see patterns I couldn't identify on my own. Would guide me toward whatever action or understanding might begin to make amends. But that was for later. For the scheduled hours when my brain was meant to be dissected and examined under professional supervision. Right now, Lego was sitting in front of me with purple bears on his phone and pain in his eyes, and he needed me to be present.

"That's a shitty gift." I said finally.

Lego's eyes widened slightly—surprise, maybe, at my bluntness. "P'Will—"

"It is. It's thoughtless and careless and it says 'I remembered I'm supposed to get you something' without any actual thought about what you might want or need."

"She tried—"

"Did she? Did she really try? Or did she just... do the minimum? Check the box?"

He was quiet for a long moment. The afternoon light had shifted again, going golden and soft, painting everything in warmer tones than the conversation warranted.

"I don't know," he admitted finally. "I can never tell with her. Whether she's trying

and failing, or whether she just doesn't care enough to try."

"Maybe it doesn't matter which one it is."

"What do you mean?"

I set down my muffin, giving the conversation my full attention. "I mean... maybe the intention doesn't matter as much as the impact. She sent you something that hurt. Whether she meant to hurt you or was just careless, the result is the same. You're sitting here with pain in your eyes, looking at purple bears that remind you of everything she built without you."

Lego blinked. His eyes were bright—not quite crying, but close.

"When did you get so wise?"

"I'm not wise. I just..." I reached out, taking his hand. His fingers were cold in mine. "I spent a long time thinking about how my actions affected other people. After everything with Est. I had to learn that 'I didn't mean to hurt you' doesn't undo the hurt. That the impact matters more than the intention."

"Your therapist again?"

"My therapist is very smart."

He laughed at that—watery, but real. "She must be. She's kept you alive this long."

"She's had help." I squeezed his hand. "You've had a lot to do with it, you know. Showing up every Wednesday. Refusing to let me disappear completely."

"That's just—"

"It's not 'just' anything. It's important. It's the reason I'm still here, still trying, still painting apologies instead of—" I stopped, not wanting to complete the thought. The alternatives to 'still here' were too dark to name, even in conversation.

But Lego understood. His grip tightened on my hand. "I'm glad you're still here." he said quietly.

"Me too. Most days." I paused, considering whether to say the next part. Then: "And I'm sorry. For leaving you alone when you needed me. For being so trapped in my own grief that I couldn't see yours."

"P'Will, you don't have to—"

"I do. I do have to." I met his eyes, holding his gaze with an intensity I rarely allowed myself. "Your parents abandoned you. And then I abandoned you too, in my own way. Not physically—I was still here, in this building—but emotionally. I wasn't present for you. I wasn't the brother you needed. And you deserved better."

The tears finally fell—his, not mine, though mine weren't far behind. They slid down his cheeks silently, tracking paths through whatever remained of his makeup.

"I'm working on being better," I continued. "With therapy and medication and all the small steps I'm trying to take. And part of being better is acknowledging when I've failed. When I've hurt people."

"You didn't hurt me—"

"Didn't I? Those years of silence, of locked doors, of refusing to let you in? That didn't hurt?"

He opened his mouth. Closed it. Looked away.

"It hurt," he admitted finally, his voice small. "I thought... I thought you didn't want me anymore. That I was a burden. That my presence was making things worse for you."

The words were a knife in my chest. I'd known, intellectually, that my isolation had affected him. But hearing it confirmed—hearing the specific shape of his pain—was something else entirely.

"You were never a burden," I said fiercely. "Never. You were the only thing that kept me connected to the world. The only reason I didn't completely disappear. And if I made you feel otherwise, that was my failure. Not yours."

He was crying openly now, his breath coming in small hitches, his face crumpling with the release of emotions he'd clearly been holding for a long time.

I pulled him close.

It was awkward—the angle was wrong, the sofa cushions were in the way, neither of us had positioned ourselves for hugging. But I managed, pulling him against my chest, wrapping my arms around his shaking shoulders, holding him the way I should have been holding him for years.

"I'm sorry," I murmured into his hair. "I'm sorry for all of it. For my illness taking me away. For not fighting harder to stay present. For making you feel alone when you should have felt loved."

He cried for a while. I let him—let the tears soak into my sweater, let the hiccupping breaths shake both our bodies, let the grief and relief and complicated love flow through us without trying to stop it or fix it or rush it along.

My mother would have been proud. The thought surfaced unbidden, bringing with it a fresh wave of emotion. She'd always known how to hold someone through a storm. How to be a steady presence when everything else was chaos. She'd done it for me countless times—held me while I cried, listened without judging, loved

without conditions. And now it was my turn to be that for Lego.

When the storm finally passed—when his breathing steadied and his tears slowed and his body relaxed against mine—we stayed where we were for a while longer. Neither of us seemed ready to move, to break the connection we'd built.

"Thank you." Lego said eventually, his voice muffled against my chest.

"For what?"

"For saying it. For acknowledging it." He pulled back slightly, enough to look at my face. His eyes were red and swollen, his makeup thoroughly ruined, but there was something lighter in his expression. Like a weight had been lifted. "I didn't realize how much I needed to hear that until you said it."

"I should have said it sooner."

"Maybe. But you said it now. That counts."

I thought about Est. About the apology I was trying to send. About how saying the right thing at the right time could matter, even when the right time was long past.

"Yeah," I agreed. "It does count."

We sat in comfortable silence for a few more minutes. The painting by the window was still drying, still waiting to become a message that could be sent. The muffins were still on the table, half-eaten, their lemony sweetness lingering on my tongue. The afternoon was shifting toward evening, the golden light taking on amber tones.

"Stay for dinner." I said. It wasn't a question.

"You want to cook again?"

"Or we could order. Your choice."

Lego smiled—small and genuine, the kind of smile that came from a place of genuine happiness rather than performed cheer. "Let's order. I'm tired of being responsible."

"Fair enough."

I reached for my phone to pull up the delivery app. But before I could navigate away, I paused at the home screen, looking at the photo I'd taken of the painting.

Est's hands. The red rose. All that gray and blue made meaningful by a single burst of color.

I'm sorry I couldn't be what you needed.

The thought still circled. But now there was something else alongside it. Something that felt almost like hope. But maybe—someday—I can become what you deserve.

It wasn't a guarantee. Wasn't a promise I was capable of keeping. But it was a direction. A goal. Something to work toward, one small step at a time. I set the phone aside and turned my attention back to Lego, to dinner choices, to the simple task of existing alongside someone who loved me. The rest could wait. The apology would be sent. The healing would continue, slow and imperfect and absolutely necessary.

The moment stretched between us—comfortable and fragile at once, filled with the echo of his laughter and the warmth of something I'd almost forgotten existed.

He was here. On my sofa. After I'd spent years pushing him away.

The realization kept hitting me in waves, each one carrying more weight than the last. All those months of locked doors and unanswered messages. All those times I'd heard his key in the lock and felt my chest tighten with something that wasn't quite relief and wasn't quite panic. All those Wednesdays when he'd come to clean and bring flowers and check on me, and I'd given him nothing in return but my silence and my need.

And still, he kept showing up. Still feeding me. Still making me talk about feelings I'd rather bury. Still sitting on my sofa in his too-fashionable clothes with his bag of muffins and his glass of flower tea, acting like this was normal. Like we were normal. Like the years of distance between us had never happened.

I didn't deserve this. Didn't deserve him.

The thought rose automatically, the familiar chorus of self-recrimination that had become my constant companion. But something else rose with it—something newer, something I was learning to cultivate in therapy.

Maybe it's not about deserving.

Dr. Suriya had said that once, during a session where I'd been particularly deep in self-hatred. "Love isn't a transaction, William. People don't love you because you've earned it. They love you because of who you are—and sometimes, who you are is someone who needs grace."

I hadn't understood it then. Was still learning to understand it now. But watching Lego catch his breath on my sofa, his face still flushed from laughter, I thought maybe I was getting closer.

I reached out and gave his foot a light push with mine. The gesture was impulsive—born from some deep muscle memory I didn't know I still possessed. A playful tap, the kind of casual physical contact we used to share constantly before I'd walled

myself off. Before touch had become something that felt dangerous instead of natural.

Lego's eyes widened.

I saw the surprise there, the quick calculation of whether this was allowed, whether the walls I'd built were finally coming down or whether this was an aberration that would be followed by retreat.

Then his foot pushed back.

A small motion. Tentative. Testing the waters.

I pushed again. Harder this time.

His whole face changed—the caution dissolving, the old mischief returning. His foot came back at mine with genuine force, and suddenly we were pushing and shoving like children, our legs tangled in some approximation of the wrestling matches that had defined our early friendship.

Before I quite knew what was happening, I'd grabbed his ankle.

My fingers found the ticklish spot behind his knee—the one I remembered from a thousand childhood battles, the secret weapon I'd discovered when he was twelve and I was thirteen and we'd been fighting over the last cookie in my mother's jar.

"Nooo!" The shriek that erupted from him was pure, unfiltered, beautiful. His whole body convulsed with sudden laughter, jackknifing off the sofa as he tried to escape my grip. "No, no, no—P'Will—stop—"

But I didn't stop.

Something had taken hold of me—something that felt almost like joy, almost like the person I used to be before grief and illness had hollowed me out. I kept tickling, kept finding new spots to attack, kept watching him writhe and twist and gasp for breath.

"Please—" He was hiccupping now, the laughter coming in waves that left him barely able to form words. "Mercy—I surrender—"

"Surrender accepted when you admit the muffins were for me, not for yourself."

"They were—for—you—" Each word was punctuated by another burst of helpless laughter. "I swear—P'Will—please—"

I didn't relent. Not immediately. There was something addictive about the sound of his joy—something I'd been starving for without knowing it. The pure, uncomplicated happiness of someone who wasn't thinking about anything except this moment, this sensation, this ridiculous battle between friends.



For a moment—just a moment—I saw the twelve-year-old Lego. The one who used to chase me through my mother's house, his footsteps thundering on the wooden floors while she called after us to be careful. The one who laughed at everything, who found delight in the smallest things, who approached the world with a kind of innocent enthusiasm that I'd envied even then.

The one who used to throw himself at me without warning, demanding piggyback rides and wrestling matches and any excuse for the physical contact he craved. Who would climb onto the sofa beside me while I was sketching and drape himself across my back like a cat seeking warmth. Who had no concept of personal space because, with me at least, he'd never needed one.

The one who hadn't yet learned that the world could be cruel. That people left. That love could be withdrawn without warning or reason.

I saw that boy in the man on my sofa, and something in my chest ached with a fierce, protective love. His face was turning red now. The laughter was stealing his breath, tears streaming from the corners of his eyes, his whole body shaking with the effort of trying to escape my tickling fingers.

I released him.

He collapsed back against the sofa cushions, boneless and gasping, his chest heaving with the aftermath of the attack. His hair was disheveled—the careful styling ruined, strands sticking up in every direction—and his clothes were twisted from the struggle.

He looked like a disaster. He looked like my best friend.

"You're mean," he gasped, one hand pressed against his stomach like he was afraid his abs might cramp from the laughter. "You're so mean."

"You deserved it."

"For what?" His voice was still breathless, still carrying the echo of giggles that wouldn't quite stop.

"For sounding like my therapist. For being annoyingly wise. For showing up every Wednesday for three years like some kind of stubborn flower-delivering angel." I paused, something more vulnerable rising in my throat. "For not giving up on me when I'd given up on myself."

The laughter faded from his face, replaced by something softer. Something that looked almost like the expression my mother used to wear when she looked at both of us—that particular blend of love and worry and hope that only family could achieve.

"I hate you," he said quietly.

"No you don't."

"No." His voice was soft now, the playfulness gone, replaced by something raw and honest. "I don't. I never could."

We sat there in the aftermath of the tickle fight, both of us slightly disheveled, both of us breathing harder than we should have been from such a brief physical exertion. The distance I'd built between us—all those months of walls and silence and locked doors—seemed thinner somehow. More permeable. Like maybe, with enough moments like this, it might eventually disappear entirely.

"I missed this." Lego said eventually, his voice still slightly rough from the laughter.

"Missed what?"

"This." He gestured vaguely at the space between us, at the sofa, at the general atmosphere of the afternoon. "You. Actually being... you. Not the version that was hiding. Not the version that couldn't look at me. The real you."

The words landed in my chest, settling somewhere deep.

"I missed me too," I admitted. "I didn't realize how much until today."

"Today?"

"Coming down to the lobby. Opening the window this morning. Painting that—" I nodded toward the canvas by the window, still drying, still waiting. "All of it. It feels like... like I'm starting to remember who I was. Before everything got so dark."

Lego was quiet for a moment, studying my face with those too-perceptive eyes. "You're not going to be exactly who you were," he said carefully. "You know that, right? This—everything you've been through—it changes you. Even when you get better, you're not going to be the same person."

"I know."

"But that's okay. Maybe you'll be better. Maybe you'll be different in good ways, not just hard ones. Maybe—" He hesitated, then pushed forward. "Maybe you'll be someone who knows what it's like to struggle, and that will make you kinder. To yourself and to everyone else."

I thought about Est. About the apology I was trying to craft. About all the ways my illness had hurt people, and all the ways my recovery might help me understand—really understand—what it meant to be broken and still trying.

"Maybe." I agreed.

"Definitely." Lego's confidence was absolute, the way it always was when he believed in something—or someone. "You're already kinder than you were last year."

Less locked away. You came to the lobby, P'Will. Do you know how huge that is?"

"You keep saying that."

"Because it keeps being true." He sat up straighter, pulling his legs under him in that familiar cross-legged position he'd been adopting since childhood. "A year ago, you wouldn't have even considered it. Six months ago, you would have considered it and decided it was impossible. Three months ago, maybe you would have tried and had a panic attack in the elevator."

"I almost had a panic attack in the elevator today."

"But you didn't. You pushed through. You made it all the way to the lobby, and you waited for me, and you caught me when I jumped on you like an idiot—"

"You always jump on me like an idiot."

"That's not the point." He was grinning now, but there was something serious underneath. "The point is you did it. And tomorrow, maybe you'll do something else. And the day after that, something else again. And eventually—maybe not soon, but eventually—you'll be someone who can leave this building without a plan. Without it being a whole big thing. It'll just be... normal."

Normal. The word felt foreign. Aspirational. Like something that belonged to other people—people whose brains didn't sabotage them, whose bodies didn't betray them with panic and fear and the constant drumbeat of danger, danger, danger. But sitting here, in the aftermath of a tickle fight, with Lego looking at me like I was capable of anything—Maybe it didn't seem quite so impossible.

"I should let you rest," Lego said eventually, glancing at the time on his phone. "You've had a big day."

"So have you. Running into Est. Bringing me muffins. Being subjected to tickle torture."

"The tickle torture was unexpected. I may need to file a complaint."

"With who?"

"Your therapist. She should know what kind of monster she's helping to heal."

I laughed at that—a real laugh, not the hollow sound I'd been producing for months. It felt strange in my throat, like a muscle I'd forgotten how to use. But strange in a good way.

"Stay," I said, surprising myself. "For dinner, at least. We can order something. Watch a movie. Pretend we're normal people for a few more hours."

Lego's expression softened. "Are you sure? I don't want to impose—"

"You never impose." The words came out more vehemently than I'd intended, carrying the weight of years of unspoken guilt. "You've never imposed, Lego. Not once. If anything, I'm the one who's been—" I stopped, the old habits of self-criticism threatening to take over. "I'm asking because I want you here. Because having you here makes everything feel more bearable. Because—"

Because I'm trying to be better at asking for what I need, I thought but didn't say. Because my therapist says that's part of recovery—learning to let people in instead of pushing them away.

Lego didn't need me to finish. He just smiled, that bright uncomplicated smile that had been lighting up my life for over a decade. "Okay," he said. "I'll stay."

"Good."

"But I get to pick the movie."

"Fine."

"And we're ordering from that Thai place you always say is too expensive."

"We'll split it."

"No we won't. You're paying. Consider it reparations for the tickle attack."

"That seems unreasonable."

"That seems like justice."

I looked at him—at his messy hair and his bright eyes and his ridiculous bag with its heart-shaped window full of stuffed animals—and felt something I hadn't felt in a very long time.

Gratitude. Simple and pure and overwhelming. For him. For this moment. For the slow, imperfect work of becoming human again.

"Fine," I said. "You win."

"I always win."

"No you don't."

"I do when it matters."

He was right. He usually was, about the things that counted. That was one of the many reasons I loved him—the particular stubbornness that refused to accept defeat when it came to people he cared about.

Even people who'd given him every reason to walk away.

"Thank you." I said. The words felt inadequate, too small to contain everything they needed to carry. But I said them anyway because saying them mattered. Because the act of offering was valuable even when the offering felt insufficient.

Lego tilted his head. "For what?"

"For everything. For staying. For not giving up. For—" I gestured vaguely at the room, at the day, at the complicated tangle of recovery and connection and hope. "For this."

He didn't say anything. Just reached across the sofa, found my hand, and squeezed. The touch was warm. Solid. Real. And for the first time in a very long time, I let myself believe that maybe—just maybe—everything was going to be okay.